CONTENT WARNINGS

*Gore

*Fire

*Car accidents

*Death

*Suicide

[Theme music: “Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here” by Theo Goodwin]

INTRO

The Underwood Collection is a derivative, non-canonical, fan-made project derived from The Magnus Archives, an original horror podcast which is created and distributed by Rusty Quill Ltd. The Underwood Collection is not endorsed by Rusty Quill and is distributed under a Creative Commons, attribution, non-commercial sharealike 4.0 international license. For more information about the original source material, visit www.RustyQuill.com/TheMagnusArchives.

The Underwood Collection, Episode 18: Betrothed

[Theme ends.]

[Tape recorder clicks on. Static is heard throughout.]

MORGAN

[Irritated beyond words] 2006. There are statements from *2006* that haven't been catalogued, Ulysses. Chronological order, we've *been* through this. I don't care what sort of quest you'be flung yourself into, I will be having words with you when you get back. About the filing *and* the fact that you disappeared into *thin air* with a cryptic note, no way to follow you, and the very deliberate insinuation that our *boss* is not only a murderer but a— a servant of the Dark.

But I am the only one who knows, because you asked, and I'll respect your wishes. I'm just saying that if you die, I'll kill you myself, and if you *don't,* I swear to god you're never going to hear the end of it.

Still. One of us is going to have to do our job.

[Papers rustling.]

Statement of Lauren McGregor, regarding a pair of earrings. Original statement given December 8th, 2006. Morgan Gaiman, Usher Foundation Archivist, recording.

Statement begins.

I think it started with the engagement. It must have, somehow. That's all I thought it was—an engagement to my long-time girlfriend, Zaria.

One of her… aunts, I think? Not—not biological, but someone important to her - had passed away, and she'd gotten a few small things from the estate. We got the package one evening right before I had to go to work, and I watched her open the box and carefully examine everything her aunt had left her. Some homemade candles, an old book, and an antique pair of earrings.

When she saw the earrings she'd smiled, a big sharp grin, and turned to me. She said, and I remember this word for word, "Hey, sunshine, I've been waiting for these. Wanna get married?"

I said yes, of course. The earrings— a heirloom engagement gift, she said— were already warm from her hands when I put them on, light catching in the orange gemstones like sparks. Even as I had to leave, I was dizzy from her kisses and this new milestone.

I was absolutely giddy. I mean, who wouldn't be? I'd just gotten engaged to the love of my life.

I didn't even care about work—my job is a lot of standing around over hot stovetops at odd hours. Late night shifts are mostly an opportunity to listen to music or read between the occasional customer; the place is normally empty, no other employees on the same shift and not many customers coming in during the dead of night. Mostly just the occasional trucker or pothead, looking to fill up on easy, cheap calories. It's not exactly a thrilling career. But I ended up practically basking in happiness that day, realizing how wonderful and complete my life was outside of work, so even with the tinny music and the greasy, boring work, I was too happy to let the monotony bother me. It was good.

I just wish I could have kept that.

When the man came in, just before I closed up, I could tell he was a trucker-had the tired look about him of someone working late at night. Sure, I'd also seen him pull into the lot, but the look would have been a giveaway even if I hadn't.

He walked up to the counter with a heavy gait, had this kind smile on his face when he ordered his sandwich and fries to go. He commented on my earrings, how unusual they were, and asked me where I'd gotten them.

I couldn't help the dumb, infatuated smile from spreading across my face. I thanked the man, and couldn't help but reach up to toy with them when I told him, "They're an engagement gift from my fiancee."

The metal was hot even then, and I found comfort in the feeling of it under my fingertips as I twisted the stud.

The trucker mentioned how expensive the earrings looked, and asked me if I should be wearing something so pricey out casually.

They were a heirloom, I told him, and a little fancy to wear on an everyday basis, yeah, but just the once wouldn't hurt anything.

The trucker smiled and congratulated me, said he hoped I'd be happy. He talked about his family for a bit, his wife and his daughter and how amazing it was to build that up, how nice it was to see young people doing the same. It was a pleasant bit of conversation while I made the food, and soon I handed him his sandwich, fully expecting to never see him again.

I started cleaning up even before he was out the door with a jangle of the cowbell hanging above it. The music had gotten turned off a few minutes before he'd come in, so I could hear the faint creaking from the suspension as he climbed in, and the spluttering start of that massive engine. The familiar crunch of tires on gravel disappeared as I made my final checks before I could leave. It was quick and easy, and before long I was out the door, still riding on the dizzying high from my engagement, eager to get home to my new fiancée.

I pulled out of the parking lot only a little while after the 18-wheeler did. Enough to put some distance between us, normally, but trucks need to go slow and the stretch of highway between the rest stop and home is straight and barren, nothing but the road and the dark, flat fields, with just a shallow ditch between them. It's easy to go a few miles per hour over the speed limit, y'know? So between the truck's slow pace and my, uh, eagerness to get home quickly, I ended up following the truck for a little while before my exit.

I planned to pass him, at first, but because it's just a two-lane road I erred on the side of caution and took a moment to make sure the conditions were safe. Good thing I did, because the truck was swaying and veering, in spite

of the near perfect driving conditions. Not dramatically at first, nothing I wouldn't have written off as the wind if there'd been any, but it was strange enough for me to hang back and slam on my horn a few times, in case the driver had fallen asleep at the wheel.

The swaying only got worse, though, jerking over the median and just into the ditch, until suddenly taking a sharp left across the other lane and off of the road entirely, hitting the ditch at an angle that sent the truck tipping over into a giant, skidding spin.

I pulled over and stopped right away, not even bothering to check for traffic before sprinting across the highway to the truck. I was near choking on the thick cloud of dust and smoke from the crash by the time I got to the cab, already dialing 911. I thought that's what the sound was, just coughing from the dust. I gave the operator the road and the nearest two exits, told her that I could still hear the trucker, and she said there would be emergency vehicles in a few minutes. I think she was going to say something else, maybe, but I was a little frazzled and I hung up as soon as I learned there was an ambulance on its way.

Only as I walked around the truck to the bashed-in windshield did I realise the noise I'd heard wasn't coughing. It was something wetter, the rough and

painful sound of someone starting to choke. I could see him, through the broken glass, scrabbling frantically at his throat. I reached out to— I don't know, to help him? To offer him some comfort while he struggled? But as soon as I touched him, my hand jerked back. The same way you flinch away when you touch a stovetop. He was searing hot, not like a fever but some impossible, painful temperature that left me with welts on my fingertips I didn't notice until later.

I tried to do something, but there was nothing I *could* do but just- just sit there terrified next to him, trying to move the smoking pieces of wreckage around to make him more comfortable and mumbling frantic, not actually soothing nonsense while I watched him suffer.

It was horrible, but at least it was fast. First he was just hacking helplessly in an attempt to dislodge whatever was in his throat. The noises changed quickly, though, from what could be mistaken for a cough to a wet wheeze before almost disappearing entirely, except for the faintest sizzling sound. I thought it was his skin on some piece of hot metal, or something, so I didn't question the smell of cooking meat.

It was maybe a minute after I got to the crash that I remembered my phone has a flashlight, and saw what was actually happening to him. His, uh, his

throat sort of—collapsed? Caved in onto itself and started to warp like plastic under too much heat, until the skin started to bubble and blister and crack and he was left with a growing hole in his throat. He was trying to scream, I think, but his vocal cords must have gone first because it was just his face contorted in agony, no tears and no sound except for the shuddering wheeze of a long, pained exhale through whatever was left of his trachea. He died very quickly after that.

I couldn't help but to think of his family. He had a daughter, a young girl. He'd said he was looking forward to her school play, that she was excited to do it and he wanted to support her. And she'd just—lost him, in the span of a few minutes. No reason to it. No cause for the damage done to his life, to his family's life, just meaningless loss.

I stayed with the body, sat next to the smoking wreckage until the ambulance arrived. It was only a few minutes, but a few minutes was enough.

The man's collapsed throat continued to burn even when he died. I stared at it, transfixed in my shock and horror while I waited. And I saw something, something small and glinting, though the charred hole in his flesh.

I recognized it, and I reached up to my left ear. Nothing there.

I, um, recovered my earring and put the pair in my pocket before the ambulance arrived. They couldn't explain what happened, except that the man was very definitely dead and very definitely going to need a closed casket. The police couldn't find any reason when they arrived either. When I told them his throat had just… burned, one of the officers paled and said it was something to bring to a state level. Nobody asked me anything about the earring, though, and I didn't want to lose it.

Questioning took a long enough time that the world was grey instead of black when I pulled up in our driveway. Y'know that calm stillness right before dawn? Yeah, that.

I let the peace wash over me as I went to the door, trying to anchor myself in the life I'd built after such a horrible night. When I opened the door, though, it smelt *horrible,* a thick oily stench cut through with burning hair. When I went into our room, one of those handmade candles was sitting on the dresser, unlit but partially used.

But still, everything was quiet and warm, and I pretty much flopped into bed without thinking about it. I didn't have the energy to care about a stinky

candle. I didn't even shower off the grime before dropping face first into the matress, hand finding my fiancee's. She was limp, and warm, and I didn't think about it. I just fell asleep.

Nightmares about the man woke me up- being him, feeling my throat burn away from the inside, feeling fire eat away at my vocal cords and cauterize my arteries.

In my exhaustion and fear, not even really awake yet, I reached out for Zaria for comfort.

Her shoulder was cold under my hand. Stiff. I turned the bedside lamp on in a panic, and when I saw her I screamed, high and shrill enough to leave my own ears ringing.

Her throat was melted, not like the trucker's but like putty, dripping into the pillows and staining our sheets. Her eyes stared at me, wide and glassy, and her teeth were bared in a horrifying, ecstatic, smile.

I fell off the bed, scrabbling away from her body until I hit the dresser. The impact knocked over the burnt-out candle, and it hit the floor near my leg with a muffled thud. Only, it must not have been out, somehow, because the

smell of burning hair got stronger, and I could feel the heat radiating out from the dead wick.

The carpet caught quickly, fire spreading like it was soaked in gasoline, and I guess adrenaline must have kicked in, because I was running before I could think. I had the good sense to grab my cell phone on the way out, and called 911 for the second time that night.

The fire fighters still didn't arrive until the house, the place I've lived in for *years*, where I'd built up a life for myself, was burned beyond repair. There's nothing left. No photo albums or old band t-shirts or anything to preserve the memories. Just burnt walls and some skeletal remains of furniture.

I saw them bring out Zaria, all strapped into a gurney and covered up in white plastic. It hurt *so much* to really know my loss, to see it in the morning light.

I'm still reeling from it—it's only been a few days, after all. My entire life is gone, everything I care about and hoped for is just ash and ruined foundations now. Frankly, I'm so exhausted I'm surprised I have the mental capacity to give you all a statement.

But I remembered the truck driver, and the earrings. Even in this state— exhausted, depressed, whatever you want to call it— even in this state I planned to tell someone about it. If I can't get closure, at least I could give some to his family, y'know?

I assumed the earrings were on me - I was still wearing the clothes I'd left work in when I escaped the fire. But when I finally thought to check, there was only one earring in my pocket.

I would have written it off as a coincidence, otherwise. I'm not— I'm still not sure it's anything more than a horrible, horrible coincidence. A week ago, I would have never considered coming to the Usher Foundation.

I've lost everything but my pride at this point, though, so if losing that somehow helps me recover from this, I'm willing to give it up.

Statement ends.

[blowing out a long breath] Jesus Christ. Okay.

[notes shuffling]

Okay, so it looks like Ms McGregor lost everything. The house entirely burned to the ground and nothing was salvageable. It looks like she moved from Bridgeport, West Virginia to live with her family in Vermont right after everything happened. Cass was the one who followed up with the poor woman, thank God, and it looks like she's still living with them. She hasn't been able to hold down a steady job or start dating again from the looks of it. She never recovered, which isn't all too surprising in this case; the Desolation tends to burn people out completely.

Speaking of the Desolation, Zaria herself is her own sort of enigma. No one could figure out cause of death for her. The coroner did find one of the earrings lodged in her throat surrounded by abnormal tissue which- *[page flipping]* Yeah, that was just wax.

Nothing unusual with the driver, which is sort of the issue. He had absolutely no history of DUI or sleeping at the wheel. His autopsy was also inconclusive, by the way. And his—

[banging the door open]

ULYSSES

[strangled] Morgan.

MORGAN

Oh my God, Ulysses—

ULYSSES

She was lying. None of it was real. Nothing. She—

MORGAN

Who was lying? Adriene?

ULYSSES

Yes. Or— I don’t know.

MORGAN

[Simult.] How did you— why are you covered in dirt?

ULYSSES

They hate each other.

MORGAN

Who?

ULYSSES

Morgan, I don’t know how to say—how to say any of this without sounding absolutely out of my mind—

MORGAN

Well, sit down first. Okay? Sit down.

ULYSSES

Right. Right.

MORGAN

There.

ULYSSES

Right.

MORGAN

What’s that?

ULYSSES

What?

MORGAN

What are you holding?

ULYSSES

Oh. It's— It's a statement— how good is your Morse?

MORGAN

Did you go to some random building and find a statement in *Morse code?* I— Jesus, Ulysses, what *have* you been doing for the past *three* days?

ULYSSES

No one answered the emails, no one took the calls. I did some digging through the domain name, found an address. A warehouse. On Sunset Drive, like some sort of sick joke. It was— it was a front. Sign outside the door and everything. The inside was—

MORGAN

Empty?

ULYSSES

I wish. No. It was filthy. Termites. Ants. Worms. And this.

MORGAN

Ulysses, I’m so—

ULYSSES

I translated the Morse on the bus here.

MORGAN

Why do you know Morse?

ULYSSES

It’s not important.

MORGAN

[hedging a guess] Yeah, ‘cause you’re a nerd?

[a little break in the tension]

ULYSSES

Yeah. Wait, do you?

MORGAN

All I’ll say is that it’s really good for cheating on tests.

ULYSSES

[Huffing a laugh] Right. Anyway. Look at the handwriting.

MORGAN

Oh my God. That's—

ULYSSES

Yeah.

MORGAN

That's Frank, that's— When is this from?

ULYSSES

He asked to meet at the obelisk in three days. To be as "visible as possible," apparently.

MORGAN

...You keep your phone on the whole time, okay?

ULYSSES

Sure thing, Dad.

MORGAN

I know it’s not a question of whether you’re going. Just— don’t be more impulsive than you already are.

ULYSSES

Yeah. *[Pause.]* Thanks, Mog.

MORGAN

Look, we can discuss this later, but you should get home. You look like—

ULYSSES

Like I’ve been attacked by worms?

MORGAN

Well, yeah.

ULYSSES

I’m going to go call Ever to pick me up.

MORGAN

Take care of yourself.

ULYSSES

Eh, you know me.

MORGAN

That does not inspire confidence!

ULYSSES

[from down the hall] You should get some rest, too!

[Door closes.]

MORGAN

[softly, under their breath] Well, you know me.

[Tape recorder clicks off.]

[Theme plays.]

OUTRO

The Underwood Collection is a podcast produced and distributed by the Pitch Library Creative Team. Find us on Twitter @PitchLibrary, on Tumblr at www.pitchlibrary.tumblr.com, or contact us by sending an email to

usherfoundation@gmail.com. The Underwood Theme was written by Theodore Goodwin, and the Underwood logo was created by Maebe. Thank you for listening.